

ABOUT
SHAKESPEARE
AND HIS
PLAYS

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GENIUS

SHAKESPEARE was born a poet, and he became a dramatist. During his lifetime he was the best known, and much the most popular, of the Elizabethan playwrights, and sixteen of his plays were published separately, without his authority and from an imperfect text. These are known as the Quartos. Seven years after his death two of his friends and fellow-actors, Heminge and Condell, produced an edition of thirty-six of his plays in one volume. This work, copies of which are now extremely rare, is called the First Folio. With the exception of the Bible, no book has had so great and lasting an influence on the thought and language of the English-speaking peoples. Thousands of men and women quote from it daily, without being aware of their debt; for, more than any other writer, Shakespeare had the gift of coining the phrases which become at once part of the common speech.

To poets he has always been the King of poets. But, perhaps, it is an even greater tribute to his genius that, in all ages, many who have had no particular taste for poetry as such, have found in him their favourite reading.

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The reason for this is, that he makes us acquainted with a great number of vivid and intensely interesting people. He takes us into a bigger world than is the lot of the ordinary man, a world full of colour and romance, but throbbing with the passions and emotions which are the stuff of all human experience. We see life on a large scale, its fun, its humour, its pathos, and its tragedy. Best of all, we are allowed to see it, as Shakespeare himself saw it, 'steadily and whole'. He does not preach to us, as even Dickens preached, nor tamper with the balances. Throughout, he remains magnificently impartial; not because he was indifferent, but because he understood. For to understand, though it is not necessarily to condone, is at least not to judge.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries, especially the translators of the Bible, did a great deal to fix the form of our literary language. Certain words have changed their meaning and certain idioms have become obsolete. But, in essence, the speech of Shakespeare is the speech of to-day, and never more so than at the greatest moments of his plays. The scene in which King Lear wakes after his fit of madness is a good illustration of this. Severed from its context, the passage inevitably loses its dramatic point and its pathos; but the reader will notice the extreme simplicity of the language; also, that there are only two words, 'abuse' and 'fond',

which are used in a different sense from that which they now usually bear.

Kent. He wakes ; speak to him.

Doctor. Madam, do you ; 'tis fittest.

Cordelia. How does my royal lord ? How fares your majesty ?

Lear. You do me wrong to take me out of the grave :

Thou art a soul in bliss ; but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

Cor. Sir, do you know me ?

Lear. You are a spirit, I know : when did you die ?

Cor. Still, still, far wide !

Doct. He's scarce awake : let him alone awhile.

Lear. Where have I been ? Where am I ? Fair daylight

I am mightily abused. I should e'en die with pity,
To see another thus. I know not what to say.
I will not swear these are my hands : let's see,
I feel this pin prick. Would I were assured
Of my condition !

Cord. O, look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me.
No, sir, you must not kneel.

Lear. Pray, do not mock me :
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less ;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
Methinks I should know you and know this man ;
Yet I am doubtful ; for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is, and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments, nor I know not

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Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me ;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

Cord. And so I am, I am.

Lear. Be your tears wet ? Yes, faith. I pray,
weep not :

If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me ; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong :
You have some cause, they have not.

Cord. No cause, no cause.

Lear. Am I in France ?

Cord. In your own kingdom, sir.

Lear. Do not abuse me.

Doct. Be comforted, good madam : the great
rage,

You see, is kill'd in him ; and yet it is danger
To make him even o'er the time he has lost.
Entreat him to go in ; trouble him no more
Till further settling.

Cord. Will't please your highness walk ?

Lear. You must bear with me.

Pray you now, forget and forgive ; I am old and
foolish.

There are, of course, many difficulties in Shakespeare, due sometimes to the corruption of the text, and sometimes to the quality of the thought. But they are matters of detail. With a short glossary and a minimum of notes, such, for instance, as are supplied by the Temple Classics, there is no play which cannot be understood and enjoyed by the man-in-the-street of to-day.

People have sometimes asked, ' Is it possible

that the son of a provincial tradesman, who left the local Grammar School before his education was complete, to be apprenticed to his father as a butcher, and who afterwards joined a company of players in London in a very humble capacity, should have written the greatest of all English plays ? ’

In reality, the question is meaningless. Humanly speaking, it is improbable that *anybody* should have written the greatest of Shakespeare’s plays : almost incredible that one man should have produced at least twenty-two works of supreme genius in nineteen years. Yet the thing happened. The only people in a position to say whether Shakespeare was, or was not, capable of performing this feat were Shakespeare’s friends and contemporaries. And they have said it. Apart from the internal evidence and the testimony of Francis Meres ¹ in 1598, the preface to the First Folio by Heminge and Condell, Ben Jonson’s commendatory verses in the same volume ² and his subsequent criticism of Shakespeare in *Discoveries*, settled the matter once and for all. It is only a strange kind of intellectual perversity which persists in trying to find a mystery where there is no mystery to be found. For genius is a gift of the gods, and, when it is given, it is given without respect of persons. Dante, it is true, was an Italian aristocrat, and Milton a Cambridge scholar ; but

¹ See table of events.

² See extracts at end of book.

Genius

Molière was the son of a bailiff, Burns a ploughman, and Amos a herdsman of Tekoa. For the spirit blows where it lists, with scant regard for the regulations of pedants.

But even genius has its limitations. It is necessarily affected both by the tone and temper of the age into which it is born, and by the accidents of private life. If Milton, for example, had lived at the time of the Crusades, he would not have written *Paradise Lost*. Every poet reflects, to some extent, the spirit of his age, either as its spokesman, or because he is in revolt against it. Shakespeare's age was an age of adventure and self-confidence. Two events had affected it profoundly, the recovery of the audacious Greek spirit through the recovery of Classical Literature, and the discovery of America. Together they seemed to have opened out infinite fields of adventure, whether spiritual, physical, or intellectual. Further, in England, the temper natural to the times had been heightened by the defeat of the Spanish Armada. A new feeling of national unity and national pride stirred in men's blood. Their country was prosperous and well governed; they believed in themselves and in the future of their race.

The world has shrunk much since those days. We 'listen-in' to concerts in New York, and talk to Australia by wireless; and we have learned that even knowledge has its limits.

Only, perhaps, if Science were to bring us into touch with some inhabited star, should we recapture the Elizabethan sense of boundless possibilities.

Shakespeare shared with his contemporaries this zest in life, which turns a man's thoughts outwards rather than inwards, and makes him more interested in what is happening round him than in the processes of his own mind. He loved the country and country sports, the gossip of the market-place, the humours of the tavern, the pageant of town and court, good cheer and good company. And he loved England passionately :

This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands ;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This land of such dear souls, this dear dear land.

And his consciousness of national strength finds an echo in the famous outburst of Philip the Bastard, in *King John* :

Come the three corners of the world in arms,
And we will shock them. Nought shall make us rue,
If England to itself do rest but true.

The salient events of Shakespeare's life can be told very briefly. [He was born at Stratford-on-Avon in 1564, the son of a father who had settled there, and who, after a period of pros-

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perity, in which he held the highest municipal offices, began to go down hill. At about eight years old he went to the local Grammar School, where he would be taught Latin and, probably, a little French, to read the Bible and to write the old Gothic script, which was not unlike the German, and which had not yet been superseded in the country by the 'Sweet Roman hand'. This is the script which he used in signing his name and in which, no doubt, he wrote his plays. At thirteen, or earlier, he was removed from school, to help his father in the struggle against ill fortune, and apparently he showed no great aptitude for the business. In 1582, when he was not yet nineteen, he was married to Anne Hathaway, the daughter of a yeoman farmer of Shottery, and his senior by eight years. Six months after the marriage his eldest daughter, Susanna, was born. In 1585 his wife gave birth to twins (Hamnet, who died young, and Judith), and in the same year, having incurred the hostility of a local magnate, Sir Thomas Lucy (the Justice Shallow of *Henry IV*), owing to a poaching affair, he left Stratford, unaccompanied, to push his fortunes elsewhere. This had been the season of wild oats; and, looking back upon it, half humorously, in later years, he makes his shepherd say in *The Winter's Tale*:

'I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out

the rest ; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting.'

It is not certain that he went straight to London ; but within a year or two he had joined a company of actors there, with which he remained associated during the whole of his career, and which ultimately had King James I for its patron.

As an actor, he does not seem ever to have been in the first flight ; but by 1592 he had become sufficiently prominent as an actor-dramatist to draw upon himself a bitter attack from the pen of Robert Greene, one of the older playwrights, who scented a dangerous rival. From this year till 1611 he led a very busy life, rehearsing, acting, writing plays, producing them, and helping to manage the business of his company ; but he found time to pay regular visits to Stratford. In 1597 he bought New Place, the principal house of the town, and established his wife in it. To New Place he retired in 1611, and there he died in April 1616.

In such a life there was room for desultory reading, but none for acquiring the scholar's learning or the scholarly habit of mind which values accuracy above all things. We need not, therefore, be surprised to find that Shakespeare was ignorant of the Classical tradition, that he believed Delphi to be an island, that he gave the Romans clocks and Bohemia a sea-coast, or that

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his French in *King Henry V* is schoolboy French, full of schoolboy 'howlers'. These are the kind of mistakes which no scholar could possibly have made. His genius was both assimilative and original, but, owing to his early upbringing, essentially untutored. The knowledge that he acquired (and it was extremely varied) was acquired piecemeal and not as part of any systematic study. Milton, no doubt, was thinking of this when he wrote :

Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.

As the habit of accuracy, provided that it does not become pedantic, remains a virtue, Shakespeare's indifference to it cannot be counted as one of his merits. On the other hand, it was all to the good that, during his most impressionable years, he came under no dominating influence, literary or otherwise ; for, as a result, when he began his life's work, he was neither the slave of tradition nor in conscious revolt against it, but able to follow freely the natural bent of his own genius.

Further, it will be observed that, owing to the conditions under which his work was done, Shakespeare, for the greater part of his life at least, was never an artist with leisure to produce a flawless work of art, polishing, perfecting, and giving it to the world at his own time. He was obliged to use his great gifts to earn his daily bread. His plays were popular, and, when a

play was wanted by his company, it had to be forthcoming at the appointed time, or even earlier. There are indications in the plays that at certain points Shakespeare was writing against the clock and in the grip of fatigue. Minor characters are not differentiated; there are hurried endings, as in *As You Like It*; or he is content merely to paraphrase whole pages of his authority, such as Holinshed or North. At such moments his style is apt to become turgid and rhetorical. Even in *Macbeth* there is a long and somewhat tedious scene between Malcolm and Macduff—much fine writing, but little imaginative heat. The ease and rapidity with which he composed are attested by his contemporaries. If he had not possessed this facility, he could never have got through his work. But it would seem that he sometimes felt obliged to conserve his highest powers for the crucial moments of the drama.

One other point is worth noting, namely, the influence which early surroundings exercised on his poetry. Many poets have had, as it were, a permanent background to their poetic thoughts. For Tennyson it was the Lincolnshire Wolds, for Shakespeare the Avon Valley. Not to speak of the topical allusions, which are fairly frequent in the earlier plays, much of the imagery which coloured his thought derives from this source. His streams are always the Avon, his woods the Forest of Arden. The

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country round Stratford is not of the sensational order ; but it is full of a tranquil beauty which finds its counterpart in 'the sweet and quiet style' of *As You Like It*. The impressions of early childhood are always deep, and in Shakespeare they seem to have been indelible. Through all the busy years in London, Stratford never lost its hold on his affections ; and, even when his thoughts seemed farthest from the earth, he was steadily preparing for a return to the little provincial town, with its farms, its water-meadows, its quiet stream, and its enveloping forest.

SHAKESPEARE'S STAGE

WHEN Shakespeare left Stratford in 1585, the Drama, though still something of a novelty, had become a recognized feature of London life, frowned at, it is true, by the City authorities, who had Puritan leanings, but encouraged by the Court. Actors were a familiar sight in the streets, conspicuous by their flashy dress and their professional strut. The first public theatre had been erected in Shoreditch, in 1576, by James Burbage, father of the actor, who called it simply 'the Theater'. Others followed in due course, the Curtain in Shoreditch; the Rose, the Swan, and the Globe, on the Surrey side of the river. There were no restrictions on theatrical performances, except that they had to receive the sanction of the Master of the Revels, and might not take place during the hours of common prayer or in times of plague. The hour for the theatre was fixed by the hour for dinner, which was at noon; and dinner, in Tudor times, was a very substantial meal. Accordingly, performances began at two o'clock, and seldom lasted for more than a couple of hours. The prices ranged, in terms of modern money, from sixpence for standing room in the pit to six shillings for

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a seat in a box. In the City itself, where public playhouses were not allowed, though private performances were tolerated, the players kept within the letter of the law by calling their theatres private houses. The Burbages erected a playhouse of this type in Blackfriars, and Shakespeare was one of the shareholders. In order to pass muster as private houses, these buildings had to be on a smaller scale than the public theatres, and the prices charged were proportionately higher.

Much has been made of the social stigma attaching to actors in Elizabethan times; and certainly, in his Sonnets, Shakespeare shows some sensitiveness on the subject. Acting was a new kind of profession, and new things are generally regarded with suspicion. A 'common player' who did not belong to one of the licensed companies was liable to arrest, 'as a rogue and vagabond'. But there were actors and actors. The licensed companies included in their ranks men of very different types and attainments, from Oxford and Cambridge graduates to dismissed serving-men. Doubtless there were dissolute and disreputable characters among them, who gave point to the attacks of the Puritans; but men like Richard Burbage, Edward Alleyn who founded Dulwich College, and Shakespeare himself, did not lack either consideration or friends. Moreover, it must be remembered that, whatever may have

been the status of a common player, there was no ban on playwrights or poets ; and Shakespeare was both. He had the Earl of Southampton as his friend and patron. The production of *King Henry VI*, in 1592, established his reputation as a playwright ; and with the publication of *Venus and Adonis*, in 1593, he leapt into fame as a poet pure and simple. From that time onwards he was widely known and discussed, not as an outcast, but as a rising literary star.

When, in 1591, six years after leaving Stratford, he first entered the lists as a playwright, with *Love's Labour's Lost*, the type of play demanded by the theatres and their public was already fixed. In the hands of Lyly, Peele, Greene, Kyd, and Lodge, history and the romantic story had become the favourite theme for dramatic representations, and Marlowe had made Tragedy popular. What Shakespeare did was, first to follow in the footsteps of others, and finally to climb to heights which he alone could reach. He found an audience which had a decided taste for blood and thunder, horse-play and cheap buffoonery : he gradually accustomed it to a subtler art, which substituted Shylock for the Jew of Malta, and made of the fool in *King Lear* a figure of pathos rather than of fun.

To understand the conditions under which he worked, it is necessary to have some idea of the nature and limitations of the stage for which his plays were written.

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The Drama, in England, came to life on trestle platforms, set up in the yards of the larger taverns ; and the first public theatres preserved many traces of their humble origin. Thus, the floor was still called 'the yard', the boxes 'rooms', and all the central space of the building was open to the sky. The material used was wood, and the shape generally, though not invariably, circular—'this wooden O', as Shakespeare calls it in the prologue to *King Henry V.* Two (and in some theatres three) galleries ran round the building. The lower of these was divided into boxes ; the upper one had no partitions. Seats were not provided (except, perhaps, in the boxes), but could be hired for a small sum at the theatre. These galleries had a thatched roof which protected them from sun and rain : the rest of the building was uncovered. The stage, which was strewn with rushes and much larger than anything we are accustomed to to-day, projected far into the auditorium, and was surrounded by spectators on three of its sides. The 'groundlings', as they were called, stood on 'the yard', and formed the greater part of the audience, which, in the Globe, the theatre with which Shakespeare is most associated and in which he held shares, might number some twelve hundred. The beginning of the play was announced by three trumpet-blasts, blown from a turret. Scene followed scene without a break, though

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there seems generally to have been a short pause between the acts, which was filled with music. At the back of the stage, and covering its full width, rose a permanent wooden structure which, like the galleries, had a roof of thatch. There is still some controversy about the details of this part of the theatre, but the main outlines are tolerably clear. In the centre was a balcony, which served, when required, as a sort of upper stage. This was the balcony on which Juliet appeared to Romeo : it was also the walls of Harfleur in *Henry V* and the battlements of Flint Castle in *Richard II*. Here, probably, the musicians had their place ; and here, too, when it was not needed for the play, spectators found accommodation. Immediately underneath this balcony was a recess, which could be curtained off, and which, when the curtains, or 'traverses', were drawn aside, might reveal the tomb of the Capulets, or the bed-chamber of Desdemona, or Prospero's cave. Generally speaking, it was the *within* of the stage-directions. Three or more doors gave access to the stage, and through these the performers made their entrances and exits. Somewhere behind were two 'tiring rooms' in which they robed for their parts. No attempt was made to reproduce the dress of any particular period. Ancient Britons, Roman Senators, Athenian mechanics, and English Kings all wore the clothes of the day ; but the materials

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were often of the costliest, and formed the most important item in the expenses of production. There was no curtain and no drop-scene ; the whole of the stage was visible to the spectators, from the moment when they entered the theatre till the moment when they left it : no foot-lights, and no scenery, in the sense in which we understand it. The only aids to illusion were some obvious theatrical properties. A table, with chairs and flagons, would indicate that the scene was laid in a tavern ; a few cardboard trees and rocks suggested the forest of Arden ; an arbour and a flower-bed constituted a garden. These properties were pushed on and off the stage during the performance, and there is a curious stage-direction in *Cymbeline*, which runs, '*enter Imogen in her bed*'.

It will thus be seen that a great deal was left to the imagination of the audience ; and Elizabethan audiences do not appear to have found the strain excessive. But the poverty of the mechanical appliances at his disposal created problems for the dramatist which probably he would gladly have been spared. It is interesting to observe how Shakespeare dealt with them.

1. The absence of a curtain made it difficult, or impossible, especially in Tragedy, to give a play its most effective ending. It could not, for instance, close with the death of the hero. The actors had to be got off the stage in some natural manner, and the corpses, if there were

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any, removed ; and all in full sight of the audience. But when the real climax of a play has been reached, any subsequent action tends to weaken its effect. As there had to be a winding up, it was necessary that it should serve some essential purpose of the play, that it should be swift, without being too abrupt, and that it should strike no discordant note. We have a good example, in *Hamlet*, of the difficulty and of the way in which it was met.

When Hamlet dies there are four corpses on the stage, the King, the Queen, Laertes, and Hamlet himself : we are still ignorant of the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and we are expecting the return of Fortinbras.

Hamlet. O, I die, Horatio ;
The potent poison quite o'er-crows my spirit :
I cannot live to hear the news from England ;
But I do prophesy the election lights
On Fortinbras : he has my dying voice ;
So tell him, with the occurrents, more or less,
Which have solicited. The rest is silence. (*Dies.*)

Horatio. Now cracks a noble heart. Good night,
sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest !
(*March within.*)

Why does the drum come hither ?

(*Enter FORTINBRAS and the English Ambassadors,
with drum, Colours, and Attendants.*)

Fort. Where is this sight ?

Hor. What is it you would see ?
If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search.

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Fort. This quarry cries on havoc. O proud death,
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
That thou so many princes at a shot
So bloodily hast struck ?

‘ The sight is dismal,’ says the Ambassador, and relates that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been put to death, in accordance with Hamlet’s design. Then Horatio asks that the bodies may be placed on a stage, or platform, in the public view, and that he may be allowed to tell ‘ the yet unknowing world how these things came about ’.

Fort. Let us haste to hear it,
And call the noblest to the audience.

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune :
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me.

Hor. Of that I shall have also cause to speak,
And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more :
But let this same be presently performed,
Even while men’s minds are wild ; lest more mis-
chance

On plots and errors happen.

Fort. Let four Captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage ;
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally : and, for his passage,
The soldiers’ music and the rites of war
Speak loudly for him.

Take up the bodies : such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot.

*(A dead March. Exeunt, bearing off the bodies :
after which a peal of ordnance is shot off.)*

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It will be noticed how skilfully this closing scene is linked on to the last words of Hamlet, so that, although he is dead, his presence and personality are still felt. It cannot be claimed for it that it does anything to heighten the dramatic intensity of the tragedy, but it avoids all danger of an anti-climax, and the last sounds in the ears of the audience are the strains of the funeral march and the boom of the guns.

2. The absence of scenery had one good result : it enabled a play to be acted very rapidly and without any of those vexatious pauses which break the thread of continuity. On the other hand, abrupt changes of scene were likely to prove rather bewildering to the spectators, who found little or nothing on the stage itself to assist their imagination. But, like a great novelist, a great dramatist could often suggest a background by a subtle use of language. It was a fine art, and we can see it at work in *As You Like It*. As soon as the scene shifts from the palace to the forest of Arden, the banished Duke comes on to the stage with 'Amiens, and two or three lords, like foresters'. He begins at once :

Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp ? Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court ?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference ; as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,

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Which, when it bites and blows upon my body,
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
'This is no flattery : these are counsellors
That feelingly persuade me what I am.'
Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head :
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.
I would not change it.

Amiens. Happy is your Grace,
That can translate the stubbornness of fortune
Into so quiet and so sweet a style.

Duke. Come, shall we go and kill us venison ?

The words are simple, but they manage, somehow, to create that woodland atmosphere which pervades the rest of the play, and which is kept alive, from time to time, by touches so slight that we hardly perceive them. The forest is never obtruded on us, yet we never forget that we are in a forest and in the open air, just as in *Macbeth* we are kept continually aware of the horror of darkness that broods over the murder of Duncan. But, that Shakespeare himself would have welcomed a more elaborate stage machinery, which would have taken some of the burden off his shoulders, and made it easier for the audience to follow him into the world of his imagination, is clear from the prologue to *King Henry V* :

But pardon, gentles all,
The flat unraised spirits that have dared

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On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
So great an object : can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France ? . . .

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts,
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance ;
Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth ;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there ; jumping o'er times.

3. As the performances took place by daylight, and there was no artificial contrivance for darkening the stage, the presence, or the approach, of night, moonlight, and the breaking of dawn, had all to be conveyed to the spectators through the dialogue. Thus, a further demand was made on the ingenuity of the playwright. In Shakespeare this technical necessity often becomes the occasion for very beautiful poetry ; as in the *Merchant of Venice*, when Portia and Nerissa are supposed to be approaching Belmont in the dark :

Por. How far that little candle throws his beams !
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

Ner. When the moon shone, we did not see the candle.

Por. So doth the greater glory dim the less.
And in *Hamlet* :

Horatio. But look, the morn, in russet mantle
clad,
Stalks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill :
Break we our watch up.

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And, again, in *Romeo and Juliet* :

Jul. Wilt thou be gone ? it is not yet near day :
It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear ;
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate-tree :
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.

Rom. It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale ; look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east :
Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

The indications of time are not always given in such beautiful language as this ; but the reader will notice that, whatever the play, Shakespeare always keeps a watchful eye on the clock, and never fails to tell us the hour, when it is necessary, for our understanding of the story, that we should know it.

4. Owing to the great depth of the stage, and to the fact that the performers always came on to it from the back, there was an appreciable interval of time between the moment when a new arrival was first seen by the audience, and the moment when he reached the front part of the stage, where the action took place. As the other actors were equally aware of his approach, they had to fill in the interval with some appropriate remarks. This accounts for the short introductory speeches, which seem superfluous when we are reading, and which are unnecessary on the modern stage. One example, from *Macbeth*, will serve as well as another :

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Duncan. Who comes here ?

(*Enter Ross.*)

Malcolm. The worthy thane of Ross.

Lennox. What a haste looks through his eyes !

So should he look

That seems to speak things strange.

By this time Ross has reached the front of the stage, and begins, ' God save the King ! '

Apart from the limitations of its stage, there is one convention of the Elizabethan theatre which deserves a special mention. To Shakespeare's generation it seemed unthinkable that women should act in public. Consequently, all the female parts had to be taken by men, or boys. The heroines, we know, were usually played by boys. This must have entailed some loss in the finer shades of acting. Nobody, for instance, but a woman could do full justice to the subtleties of Cleopatra's character, and it is difficult to believe that a boy actor would satisfy us as Lady Macbeth. On the other hand, there is a straightforward simplicity and candour about many of Shakespeare's heroines, which would bring them within the range of a well-trained boy actor. Boys, as a rule, are naturally imitative ; and an actor-manager must have found them more amenable to ' coaching ' than the adult members of his company, who had ideas of their own as to how their parts should be played. Nor is it credible that Shakespeare would have put so much of his

Shakespeare's Stage

best work into the characters of his heroines, unless he had been sure that they would at least be adequately rendered. As a matter of fact, there is good evidence to show that men and boys acquitted themselves more than adequately. Coryate, at all events, when for the first time he saw women acting in Venice, thought that 'they performed it with as good a grace, action, gesture, and whatsoever is convenient for a player, as ever I saw any masculine actor'; which, though it was intended as a compliment to the women, is still more a compliment to the men. In certain plays the boys even enjoyed a distinct advantage over women: those, namely, in which the heroine disguises herself in male attire. For, though a boy can 'make up' very passably as a woman, no woman in doubtlet and hose could ever hope to be mistaken for a man. However consummate her acting, she is betrayed at once by her shape and her gait. Shakespeare would probably not have employed this particular device for concealing identity so frequently, if his heroines had been played by women; and it may be doubted whether an Elizabethan audience would regard our modern Rosalinds and Violas as an improvement on the boy actors with whom they were familiar.

POETRY, DRAMA, AND HUMOUR

THREE qualities Shakespeare possessed in a supreme degree, the poetic faculty, a sympathetic understanding of human nature, and, what does not always go with the poetic faculty, a robust sense of humour. We must say a few words about each of these.

1. The function of art is to reveal beauty. To Shakespeare the appeal of beauty came as naturally as breathing. It was a simple and direct appeal, which found instant and complete expression in language. There is no groping for the right word, no straining after effect ; indeed, there is often a kind of careless ease about his greatest poetry, which almost takes the breath away. It is as if to feel and to utter were with him a single process. His language is packed with thought and fancy. Image chases image along the rhythm of his verse : Keats, at his best, comes nearest to him in this. And, more than any other poet, he binds us with the spell of words. Whenever his imagination was kindled, the golden phrases came pouring out in rich and effortless profusion. It is easier to feel the magic of words than to define it, and probably a few examples, taken almost at

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random, will help the reader more than a laboured analysis :

Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty. (*Winter's Tale.*)
That strain again ! It had a dying fall :
O it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour. (*Twelfth Night.*)

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few; do hang
Upon those boughs that shake against the cold.
(*Sonnets.*)

Finish, dear lady, the bright day is done
And we are for the dark. (*Antony and Cleopatra.*)
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns. (*Hamlet.*)

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow ?
(*Macbeth.*)

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep (*The Tempest.*)
When we are born we cry, that we are come
To this great stage of fools. (*King Lear.*)

Such lines as these haunt the memory like beautiful music. We are conscious in them of a subtle harmony between sound and meaning, which appeals alike to the ear and the understanding. They satisfy us with a sense of completeness, and yet, somehow, suggest the infinite. In fact, we feel that we are listening to the language of the gods.

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Shakespeare was before all things a poet. Probably it was as difficult for him *not* to write poetry as it is for most of us to do so. And in his plays we sometimes see the poet getting the better of the dramatist. That is to say, some of his characters, who are meant to be of quite common clay, will suddenly break out into the language of great poets. It is, for instance, the first murderer in *Macbeth* who says,

The west still glimmers with some streaks of day ;
Now spurs the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn ;

and, in *Hamlet*, the beautiful description of Ophelia's death is put, not very appropriately, into the mouth of the Queen.

Again, we can hardly believe that the crafty, shiftY Northumberland would have been capable of such true poetic feeling as is expressed in the lines :

Yet the first bringer of unwelcome news
Hath but a losing office, and his tongue
Sounds ever after as a sullen bell,
Remember'd tolling a departing friend ;
or that Bernardo, the professional soldier of a rude age, is speaking quite in character when he says,

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long :
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.

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As a rule, when we read such passages, we are too much bemused by the beauty of the poetry to notice whether they are, or are not, appropriate to the characters who speak them. We could not have spared them ; but, strictly speaking, they are not good drama.

2. To say that Shakespeare's sympathies were universal would be a foolish exaggeration ; they did not, for instance, include the Puritans, or a Sir Thomas Lucy. But they were extraordinarily wide, and embraced men of all sorts and conditions, from the tyrant to the weaver. And his understanding of them is so intimate and so sure, that we learn from him a great deal about human nature and even about ourselves. He is the best of all possible antidotes to the false sentiment which pervades so much of our current literature. We have acquired from bad drama and a worse fiction a whole code of mistaken ideas, both about the outward shows of things and about the way in which strong emotions express themselves. In Melodrama Vice is always unattractive and Virtue consistently itself ; Grief must be clamorous, or it is not recognized as grief ; Despair strikes its breast or forehead, while Heroism squares its shoulders, throws back its head, and utters some virile platitude. But it is not so in real life. Many people, during the War, were surprised to find that the platform at Victoria Station did not provide the kind of scenes which Melo-

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drama and fiction had led them to expect. As a matter of fact, men and women of ordinary self-control, when they are faced by some sharp crisis in their lives, or are under the stress of strong emotion, generally say, or do, something that is extremely simple, but at the same time extremely characteristic. What this simple but characteristic thing will be, the ordinary man cannot tell beforehand ; he only recognizes its fitness, when it has happened. When Captain Oates, crippled with frostbite, went out into the Polar blizzard to die, because he knew that his companions would never abandon him and yet had no chance of winning through to safety with him, he said, almost casually, ' I am going for a walk, and I shall probably be away for some time.' And that was all. Very simple, and very convincing, when we know how it happened ; but it would have needed genius of a rare order to divine it.

Shakespeare's plays are full of such divinations. Two examples must suffice.

Macbeth has been brought to bay by his enemies in his castle at Dunsinane. His thanes have deserted him. He is maddened by the feeling of impotence,—restless, suspicious, irritable, and giving feverish and futile orders in preparation for the hopeless struggle. At this moment he learns suddenly that Lady Macbeth is dead. This ought to have been a final and overwhelming blow ; for Lady Macbeth had

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once been very dear to him, the moving spirit in his life, his 'dearest chuck', his 'dearest partner of greatness'. But he receives the news only with an impatient exclamation, 'She should have died hereafter'—commonplace words, but terrible in their context, because they reveal in a flash how the attitude of mind which can cry, 'For mine own good all causes shall give way', gradually destroys all the normal values of life, till it strips a man even of the most natural and most deeply rooted of his affections. As soon as he has spoken the words, Macbeth himself becomes conscious of their strange lack of feeling, and he goes on to brood, characteristically, not over his loss, but over the futility of life and of his own ambitions :

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more : it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

For such revelations as this we must naturally look to the Tragedies, which deal with the deeper things of life ; but we find the same sureness of touch in the Comedies too. Rosalind (in *As You Like It*) has fled from her uncle's court to the forest of Arden, disguised as a boy. There she learns that Orlando, with whom she has fallen in love, is also in the forest. What will she say when she hears the surprising news ? Most of us, I expect, would bungle the business

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badly. We should probably contrive some expression of rapture, or, worse still, some banality about a beating heart. But Shakespeare's Rosalind, like all Rosalinds under similar conditions, thinks first of her personal appearance, and exclaims, with a gesture of comic dismay,

Alas the day ! what shall I do with my doublet
and hose ?

The only great occasion on which most readers will probably feel that Shakespeare has failed us is at the end of the *Winter's Tale*. We are more emotionally interested in the meeting between Hermione and Perdita than in the reunion of Hermione and Leontes. And yet, not only is it relegated to the second place, as perhaps the story demanded, but it is treated with a brevity which seems to lack the particular touches which only Shakespeare could give. The result is a feeling of disappointment, as if we had been defrauded of our due—which is, in itself, a testimony to our conviction of what Shakespeare could do, whenever he chose.

3. Humour springs from a perception of the incongruous. That is why the barking of a dog, scarcely noted in the street, becomes ludicrous in church. Shakespeare's humour is as comprehensive as his sympathies, and ranges from the subtlest form of irony to the well-worn Elizabethan pleasantry about the horn and deceived husbands. Some people regard his frequent repetition of the stock jests of the time

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as a concession to his audience. But it is difficult to believe that he would have dragged them in so often if he had not himself thought them funny. Standards of taste vary greatly from age to age, and the Elizabethans had strong stomachs. They had a hearty laugh for many things that we have ceased to find amusing, and it is possible that Pandarus (*Troilus and Cressida*), who inspires us only with loathing, seemed to them wholly diverting. In any case, it is important to remember that Shakespeare had a full-blooded relish for the humour of low life, as well as a deep sense of the sublime, and that, in this, he is as far removed from our ordinary conception of the artistic temperament as pole is from pole. In some mysterious way he managed to combine the peculiar gifts of Aeschylus and Aristophanes.

There is a certain form of wit, in which Shakespeare indulges freely in the Comedies, which was the business of the professional jester and the pastime of the amateur. It is a kind of mental gymnastics. Words are bandied about from mouth to mouth, turned inside out, twisted and tortured, till they become something less than third cousin to a pun. Here is a specimen of this word-play at its worst, from *Romeo and Juliet*:

Mercutio. Signior Romeo, bon jour ! there's a French salutation to your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night.

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Romeo. Good morrow to you both. What counterfeit did I give you ?

Mer. The slip, sir, the slip ; can you not conceive ?

Rom. Pardon, good Mercutio, my business was great ; and in such a case as mine a man may strain courtesy.

Mer. That's as much as to say, such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.

Rom. Meaning, to court'sy.

Mer. Thou hast most kindly hit it.

Rom. A most courteous exposition.

Mer. Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.

Rom. Pink for flower.

Mer. Right.

Rom. Why, then is my pump well flowered.

Mer. Well said : follow me this jest now, till thou hast worn out thy pump, that, when the single sole of it is worn, the jest may remain, after the wearing, solely singular.

Rom. O, single-soled jest, solely singular for the singleness !

Passages such as this do not repay study or analysis. There is no hidden gold in them ; only the superficial glitter. They are, indeed, a form of high spirits rather than of humour, and though the Elizabethans enjoyed them, the modern reader is apt to find them fatiguing.

The real treasure of Shakespeare's humour lives in his comic characters. Nowhere, except in Dickens, do we find so rich and varied a gallery. Bottom, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, Dogberry, Mr. Justice Shallow—these are types that will move to laughter so long as man

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has a diaphragm to laugh with. The voluble Mistress Quickly, with her wealth of irrelevant detail, is as true to life to-day as she was three hundred years ago.

‘Thou didst swear to me upon a parcel gilt goblet, sitting in my Dolphin chamber, at the round table, by a sea-coal fire, upon Wednesday in Wheeson week, when the prince broke thy head for liking his father to a singing-man of Windsor, thou didst swear to me then, as I was washing thy wound, to marry me and make me my lady thy wife. Canst thou deny it? Did not good-wife Keech, the butcher’s wife, come in then and call me gossip Quickly? coming to borrow a mess of vinegar; telling us she had a good dish of prawns; whereby thou didst desire to eat some; whereby I told thee they were ill for a green wound? And didst thou not, when she was gone down stairs, desire me to be no more so familiarly with such poor people: saying that ere long they should call me Madam? And didst thou not kiss me and bid me fetch thee thirty shillings? I put thee now to thy book-oath; deny it, if thou canst.’

But the giant of all Shakespeare’s humorous creations is Falstaff. He took his own generation by storm, and he has lived vigorously ever since. Fat yet cynical, unscrupulous but good humoured, vain but able to laugh at himself, and with a wit which is both cheap and subtle, dry and caustic, or redolent of ale, he appeals alike to the intellectual and to the crowd. The following sample of his humour may whet the appetite for more.

The Lord Chief Justice has been so ill-

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advised as to argue seriously with Falstaff over his preposterous claim to youth.

‘Have you not’, he says, ‘a moist eye? a dry hand? a yellow cheek? a white beard? a decreasing leg? an increasing belly? is not your voice broken? your wind short? your chin double? your wit single? and every part about you blasted with antiquity? and will you yet call yourself young? Fie, fie, fie, Sir John!’

To which Falstaff replies with gay effrontery,

‘My lord, I was born about three of the clock in the afternoon, with a white head and something a round belly. For my voice, I have lost it with helling and singing of anthems. To approve my youth further, I will not; the truth is, I am only old in judgement and understanding, and he that will caper with me for a thousand marks, let him lend me the money, and have at him.’

PLOT AND CHARACTER

ROUGHLY speaking, plays are of two kinds. In the one the characters are drawn to fit the plot ; in the other the plot is framed to suit the characters. Historical plays are necessarily of the first order, for the facts of history cannot be altered, and the skill of the dramatist consists in making the recorded events seem the inevitable result of temperament and character. Now, with the exception perhaps of *Love's Labour's Lost*, all Shakespeare's plays, whether Comedy, Tragedy, or History, belong to this order too. That is to say, he did not invent his plots, and when he did not take them from history, he took them from the popular literature of the day, Italian, French, and English. These stories were generally well known to his audience : many of them had been dramatized already ; and they were stories, not of real life, but of romance. What Shakespeare did, was to give a new interpretation of the people in them, and sometimes to introduce fresh characters of his own creation. But he did not tamper with the main outlines of the story, however improbable it might be, or work it up to a different ending. In fact, he always treated it as if it were history.

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In consequence of this rigid adherence to his text, we can sometimes see a rather interesting thing happening. As his imagination played upon the story he had chosen, some of the people who were already in it, or whom he himself had put there, appealed to him in a special way, and, coming to life in his hands, developed such amazing vitality that they did, in fact, grow too big for the plot which had to contain them. Thus, we not infrequently get a curious mingling of realism and romance ; and, in the Comedies at least, the characters are generally more convincing than the story

A striking instance of this clash between plot and character occurs in the *Merchant of Venice*. The plot hinges on a conventional conception of Jewish character, as something inhumanly mean, cunning, and cruel ; and, with the story, Shakespeare seems to have accepted this theory about Shylock. But, with his large sympathies, it was inevitable that, as the action developed, he would begin to see things from Shylock's point of view, as well as from Antonio's. But Shylock's point of view plays havoc with the story. For, unless we can believe wholeheartedly that Shylock was black all through, and something less than human, the conclusion of the play, which leaves him not only foiled but permanently and cruelly humiliated, does not satisfy our sense of justice. Shakespeare compromised. He gives us glimpses of a

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Shylock more real, more human, than the story will allow, a Shylock who is sinned against, as well as sinning.

‘He (Antonio) hath laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what’s his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cool’d by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?’

Worse still, he invests him with an element of pathos. ‘Out upon her!’ he exclaims of his daughter, who has run away with his jewels and bartered a ring for a pet monkey, ‘Out upon her! Thou torturest me, Tubal; it was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor; I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys.’

But he allows the story to have the last word, and the Shylock of the trial scene is the Shylock required by the plot; never quite convincing after we have been allowed to look below the surface of things.

Even in one of the historical plays, *King Henry IV*, we see something of the same kind happening, though here it is not a case of any clash between plot and character, but rather that one of the characters grows so big that

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he diverts our interest from the story to himself. Falstaff, presumably, was introduced into the play to explain, and possibly excuse, Prince Hal's admitted preference for the society of the Boar's Head Tavern over that of his father's court ; but, clothed in Shakespeare's wit, he becomes such a compelling figure that, like the young cuckoo, he crowds out the proper nestlings. In Part I Hotspur competes with him for our interest ; but after Hotspur's death, Falstaff dominates the play. We grow impatient when he is off the stage ; we can hardly listen to the King's dying speeches, or to Prince Hal's fine rhetoric on his accession. We want to be back in Gloucestershire with Falstaff and Justice Shallow. Shakespeare himself realized that there would be no chance for the hero of Agincourt while Falstaff was in the cast, and, in spite of his promise to 'continue the story with Sir John in it', he felt obliged to bury the fat knight somewhat hurriedly, before embarking on the serious business of *King Henry V.*

We are sometimes tempted to ask why Shakespeare never invented his own plots ; why he was always content, like most of his fellow playwrights, to take them ready-made. No doubt, the practice meant a saving of imaginative effort and also of time ; and both, as we have seen, were important to a busy man. Perhaps, too, habit had something to do with it.

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We know that he served his apprenticeship to the drama by revising other men's work, adding a scene here, rewriting a dull one there. But, probably, the best answer to the question is the obvious one, namely, that he began by following the general practice of the day, and found it to be the one which best suited his own genius.

We have perhaps a better right to wonder why, having chosen his story, he felt bound to adhere even to its most improbable details. History, of course, must be taken as it stands; but a story of fancy from an Italian novel had no such sanctity. *As You Like It* would lose nothing if the odious Oliver did not appear in the forest at the eleventh hour, to undergo a sudden and most unconvincing conversion, and win the heart of Celia with a look; or, if the usurping duke had been provided with some more plausible exit than a voluntary hermitage. Possibly Shakespeare thought that, as his audience were familiar with the story, they would resent any tampering with it, and especially with its denouement. Or he may have felt that, as the setting of the play was romance and not reality, the question of probability did not matter. In any case, his attitude remains something of a puzzle. All we can say is that, as a matter of fact, he never did take any liberties with his plots.

For this reason, it is futile to ask any questions about the plays, which attempt to go

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behind the story ; as, for example, why Cordelia, knowing her sisters as she did, refused to make any concessions to the senile vanity of her father, in order to save him from their clutches. The answer to such questions is simple, and always the same ; namely, that it was not so in the story. But, in this case at all events, we may feel certain that Shakespeare did not think that the refusal of Cordelia in the first act to humour King Lear was inconsistent with the Cordelia of the last act. After all, the gentlest and most self-sacrificing people can sometimes be extremely and unreasonably obstinate over what they regard as a matter of principle.

There are other puzzles in Shakespeare, connected with the reading of character ; notably in *Hamlet*. Hamlet attracts us from the first,—the scholar, poet, gentleman ; and we feel sure that he was also one of Shakespeare's favourite creations. We find in him many points of contact with ourselves : he seems often to express our own feelings, thoughts, and perplexities. The difficulty is, that whether we assume his madness to be wholly feigned or partly real, his actions and behaviour do not always square with our conception of his character. We think that there must be some explanation of this apparent discrepancy. We form theories about him ; but none satisfies us completely, or accounts for all the facts. Do we, because we like him, read into him too much of ourselves

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and of our personal standards, and see him, not through Shakespeare's eyes, but through our own? Or is it, possibly, because Shakespeare invested him, unconsciously, with so much of his own personality that we find this difficulty, at times, of reconciling him with the story? Whatever may be the true explanation, he remains the most perplexing of all Shakespeare's characters, and, for that reason, the most interesting.

PROSE, RHYME, AND BLANK VERSE

1. *Prose.* Shakespeare's prose has a marked rhythm, which often recalls that of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament. This need not mean that his style was consciously, or unconsciously, influenced by the translators of the Bible (Genevan and Bishops'); but that this particular rhythm was the one which came most naturally to the writers of the period. It has much of the swing of the Latin Church services.

At first Shakespeare used prose very sparingly, chiefly for clowns and other comic characters, or for such as were definitely unromantic. But, as he acquired mastery over his art, he employed it with increasing freedom, so that the frequent or restricted use of prose, in any given play, helps to fix its date. In the later plays many of the most dramatic scenes are written entirely in prose, especially where realism was essential; as, for example, in the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*. In *Hamlet* it is even used to produce the same effect as poetry :

'I have of late—but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises, and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile pro-

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montory ; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.'

There is sometimes a looseness of construction about Shakespeare's prose which might offend the scholar. But it moves very freely, and it is questionable whether English, as a literary language, did not lose more than it gained by a rigid submission to the laws of Classical syntax.

2. *Rhyme.* Shakespeare had great facility in rhyming, and in the early plays rhymed verse is frequent. But he gradually restricted his use of it, till it became practically confined to certain definite occasions ; to mark the end of an act or a scene, where it served the purpose of the modern 'curtain' ; to emphasize an exit ; to close a long speech ; or when a character is speaking aphoristically, somewhat in the manner of a Greek chorus. Rhyme has a peculiarly clinching effect. It gives a kind of finality to the summing up of a situation or the conclusion of an argument ; e.g.

The time is out of joint : O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right !

and

The play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

Its weakness is, that it strikes a rather artificial

Prose, Rhyme, and Blank Verse

note, which, if the situation is at all tense, impairs its dramatic force and, at the same time, our sense of reality. At the end of Macbeth's tremendous dagger-speech the rhymed couplet (an unusually weak one),

Whiles I threat, he lives :

Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives, comes like a sudden fall in the imaginative temperature, and sounds flat and almost conventional. In the same play Lady Macbeth, left alone on the stage between the exit of a servant and the entrance of Macbeth, sums up her feelings in the following lines:

Nought 's had, all 's spent,

When our desire is got without content :

'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

This (and especially the last two lines) suggests rather the wisdom of an aphorism than very poignant feeling. Almost immediately afterwards Macbeth develops the same idea in blank verse, but with infinitely greater effect:

Better be with the dead,

Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,

Than on the torture of the mind to lie

In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave ;

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well ;

Treason has done his worst : nor steel, nor poison

Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing

Can touch him further.

The difference does not lie only in the fact that Macbeth is a poet and Lady Macbeth is not.

Prose, Rhyme, and Blank Verse

Rhyme, however skilfully it is handled, always imposes some shackles on the free expression of thought ; and this makes it less effective for dramatic purposes than prose or blank verse. The habit of rhyming was strong in Shakespeare, and survived through the tragic period ; but in his last plays he abandoned it almost entirely.

The Lyrics, of course, are on a different footing. The Elizabethans were fond of music, especially vocal music, and demanded songs in their plays. The Lyrics provide the words for these songs. They are exquisite in their freshness and simplicity, and often have an under-current of pathos, as in the song that ends *Twelfth Night*.

3. *Blank Verse*. For use in drama, blank verse has the great advantage, over any other form of metre, of being a common speech-rhythm. We often talk blank verse, and write blank verse, without being aware of it. Perhaps the reader will not have observed that this and the preceding sentence might, quite well, be printed as blank verse—though bad at that ! Language, when it is tinged with emotion, nearly always tends to become rhythmical. Here are some well-known utterances, printed metrically :

- (a) By God ! Sir Earl,
Thou shalt either go or hang. [EDWARD I.]
- (b) Shame, shame
Upon a conquered king ! [HENRY II.]

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- (c) My seat hath been the seat of kings, and I
Will have no rascal to succeed me.
[QUEEN ELIZABETH.]
- (d) Go, you coward,
And pull the traitors out by the ears.
[HENRIETTA MARIA.]
- (e) It is, for aught I know, a crowning mercy.
[OLIVER CROMWELL.]
- (f) England has saved herself
By her exertions : she will yet save Europe
By her example. [PITT.]
- (g) I have called
The new world into existence, to redress
The balance of the old. [CANNING.]

It will be noticed that any of the above quotations would fit, as it stands, into a blank verse speech. That is why blank verse in drama, when it is properly delivered, does not destroy the illusion of reality, but, at the most emotional moments of a play, tends even to heighten it. But, for the very reason that it has one foot in prose, blank verse is the most difficult of all metres in which to write great poetry; and comparatively few even of the great poets have succeeded. If stress and pause are not frequently and subtly varied, the effect becomes monotonous. The diction, too, must be simple and yet dignified; but simplicity easily degenerates into baldness, and dignity into rhetoric. When Wordsworth is uninspired, he becomes bald, Milton dull, Shakespeare bombastic; for no poet is per-

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manently at his highest level. But, when he had shaken off the influence of Marlowe, and his imagination was stirred, blank verse became in Shakespeare's hands something extremely alive and flexible, a perfect medium for the expression whether of natural beauty or human passion.

Note.—If the reader wishes to prove for himself how frequently even the best prose-writers slip into blank verse, he should open any volume of R. L. Stevenson's *Essays* at random. He will be unlucky if he does not find one or more, and sometimes even consecutive lines of blank verse.

COMEDY AND TRAGEDY

TO read the plays of Shakespeare in what is, approximately, the order in which they were written,¹ is to follow the growth and ripening of a great genius. We see him rapidly mastering the technique of his art, beginning to move freely in the world of his imagination, learning the great language that marked his later style. And, at the same time, we become aware of a gradual change in his outlook upon life. There are always both tears and laughter in the life that is being lived around us. It is largely a matter of mood or temperament whether we are more conscious of the sunshine or of the shadows. High spirits and confidence are the normal mood of a vigorous youth and early manhood, and this is the prevailing mood of the Comedies. The world they mirror is a world of lovers, of beauty, and of romance. Villainy is conventional, unconvincing, and belongs to the story rather than to life : moreover, it is ready to change its spots at a touch from the magic wand. Disillusionment, on the lips of Jaques, is only a pose, and is turned to ridicule. The 'pangs of despised love' evapo-

¹ See order of plays at the end of book.

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rate in the 'conceits' of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the not unpleasing melancholy of Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*. Even Tragedy refuses to be very tragic, and *Romeo and Juliet* would lose little of its charm if it had ended with marriage bells.

But youth and high spirits do not last for ever, and in the later Comedies we realize that we are coming to the end of this charming but rather unreal world. The clouds that gather still disperse, as before ; but they have assumed more threatening shapes. We have glimpses too of locked doors, which we are not allowed to open, lest they should be found to contain something that would mar our enjoyment ; and in *Much Ado* we seem to be walking for a while on the very edge of a catastrophe. And so we pass into another and a very different world, in which laughter sounds ironic, and Comedy itself becomes grim¹—the world of Tragedy. Much that had once appeared important is seen to be trivial ; much that seemed trivial is found to involve tremendous consequences. Envy, pride, ingratitude, cease to be merely discords in a harmony, and take appalling shapes ; Fate is no longer a capricious goddess, playing harmless tricks with lovers, but something blind and terrible ; usurping dukes, from being a malign but almost negligible influence in the background, grow

¹ *Measure for Measure*.

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to the full stature of Macbeth, and the story of Claudio and Hero becomes the tragedy of Othello and Desdemona.

It is not necessary to suppose that this change of mood was due to any external cause, or had its roots in any personal experience of deception or ingratitude. From the purely material point of view, the period of the tragic vein was a period of unqualified success, in which the poet was able to realize his modest but very practical ambitions. No doubt he had had his disappointments. The sonnets often speak the language of discontent, and they certainly give us glimpses into the kind of rebuff to which Shakespeare's position, as an actor, may sometimes have exposed him. But, as a whole, they are too artificial, too conventional, too consciously clever, to be taken as 'the key with which he unlocked his heart'. He makes no attempt to conceal his pride in this form of literary achievement; and the joy of successful composition is more evident than any real depth of feeling.

Hardly anybody passes from early manhood into middle age without some sense of disillusionment, and when he wrote his greatest plays, though he was not old, Shakespeare no longer felt himself young. But the causes of the change in his mood lay deeper than that. The life of the imagination, in which he lived his greatest hours, follows its own laws. It is some-

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thing different and distinct both from the public life which a man lives among his fellows, and the private life which he shares with his own family, though it may feel the reactions of either. When Shakespeare began to explore human nature, it was inevitable that he would not be content to remain permanently on the surface ; inevitable, too, that when he faced the sterner realities, he would see further and feel more deeply than other men. But it is noteworthy that, sombre as the Tragedies are, they are not, in any real sense, pessimistic. They leave us harrowed, but not depressed. They do not belittle life, or distort its true values. In the darkest depths Mercy and Forgiveness shine out like stars, and Love is stronger than Death.

There is, however, one play, belonging to this period, which strikes a different note, *Troilus and Cressida*. It is an extremely interesting and clever play, and strangely modern in its tone. The love part reads like a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*; the scenes in the Greek camp are a travesty of Romance. If Shakespeare had read his Homer, he could hardly have dealt so cruelly with his heroes. Achilles is a cowardly bully, Ajax a vainglorious oaf. Hector is the only noble character in the story, and even he is only a noble fool. The play proves, what we might have guessed for ourselves in any case, that Shakespeare did

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not live always on the heights. It also proves, what we are sometimes in danger of forgetting, that, as a playwright, he was not conscious of any mission to educate the public, or preach a consistent view of life. If that had been the case, he might indeed have written *Troilus and Cressida*, in moments of depression, but he would not have given it to the stage.

The Tragic Mood spent itself, and the last plays are once more bathed in sunshine ; no longer the sunshine of spring, but something calm and mellow. To this period belong *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, which are neither Tragedy nor Comedy. The world has not lost its beauty, nor lovers their charm ; but the poet's outlook is definitely the outlook of middle age. He sees, what the young can never see—the pathos of youth ; he feels, what the young can scarcely ever understand—the craving for continuity.

Be cheerful, sir, ✓
Our revels now are ended. These our actors, ✓
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air :
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on ; and our little life ✓
Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed ; ✓

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Bear with my weakness ; my old brain is troubled :
Be not disturb'd with my infirmity ;
If you be pleased, retire into my cell,
And there repose ; a turn or two I'll walk
To still my beating mind.

The Tempest, from which these lines are quoted, was the last of Shakespeare's plays,¹ and was written at Stratford-on-Avon. As he looked up from his manuscript, he would see the Guild Chapel, and the broad street, with the Grammar School, leading in the direction of the church. Whatever thoughts they suggested to him, one, we may be sure, never entered his brain ; namely that, because of their association with him, they would one day become places of pilgrimage for men of all nations.

¹ Except for his share in *Henry VIII*.

THE MAN BEHIND THE PLAYS

THE plays create a world of their own, and the people in them become so real to us, that we sometimes find ourselves discussing them as if they had had an independent existence. But behind the plays is the man who wrote them, and, sooner or later, he too becomes for us an object of absorbing interest. For we cannot read much of Shakespeare without feeling that we have been brought into contact with a singularly attractive personality, and we are not surprised to find that 'gentle' was the epithet which Ben Jonson, his friend and rival, chose as the one which best described him. Our feeling about him may perhaps be expressed in this way. If we could be transported to Parnassus, where, according to Greek legend, the great poets survive after death, Shakespeare is the only one of the Immortals, with the exception of Chaucer, whom we should not be afraid to meet. For, although we regard him as the greatest of them all, we feel sure that he would come down to our level, without any conscious effort or the least trace of condescension; in fact, that he would be entirely human, and very good company.

It is this feeling of personal attraction which justifies our eagerness to learn whatever may be

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learned about him, and even to indulge in speculations which, by the nature of things, cannot lead to any positive result.

It is often said that we know practically nothing about Shakespeare ; and, in a sense, that is true. We know little, or nothing, about his private life, his tastes, his daily habits, or his outward appearance : we do not even know what his schoolmaster thought of him. But, in another sense, it is not true at all ; for we know, or believe we know, how he felt and what he thought ; and to know these things tells us much more about a man than any record of his daily doings. The truth is, that every poet opens for us some of those doors in his soul, which most men keep carefully locked, and, in so doing, reveals to us many of the things which ordinarily we know only about our most intimate friends.

What, then, can we learn about Shakespeare from his poetry ?

In drawing any inferences, we are obliged, in his case, to exercise a good deal of caution, because the bulk of his work is drama, and the dramatist does not express his own thoughts, but the thoughts which are appropriate to the characters in his play. We find, for example, such contradictory views about man and Providence as the following :

- (a) All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
(As You Like It.)

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- (b) What a piece of work is man ! how noble in reason, how infinite in faculty ; in form and moving how express and admirable ; in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god !
(*Hamlet.*)
- (c) As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods ;
They kill us for their sport. (*King Lear.*)
- (d) The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us. (*King Lear.*)

Each of these sentiments is appropriate to the *dramatis persona* who expresses it ; but we cannot say that any one of them represents Shakespeare's own view. It is unwise therefore to read too much of Shakespeare into his plays, and most unwise of all to look in them for a record of his personal experiences. On the other hand, as we have already seen, there are occasions on which the poet in Shakespeare gets the better of the dramatist, and there are others on which the dramatist nods. Whenever a character speaks obviously out of his part, we may be sure that the poet has slipped, unconsciously, into his, or her, place, and is expressing his own feelings. There is a good instance of this in *Twelfth Night*. Duke Orsino who is, or believes himself to be, passionately in love with the Countess Olivia, and who has already sent Viola to protest his unshakable fidelity, says to the same Viola :

Let still the woman take
An elder than herself ; so wears she to him,
So sways she level in her husband's heart :

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For, boy, however we may praise ourselves,
Our fancies are more giddy and infirm,
More longing, wavering, sooner lost and worn,
Than women's are.

These are the sentiments, not of an infatuated lover, but of a disillusioned husband ; and it is evident that Shakespeare is thinking, for the moment, not about the Duke and *his* feelings, but about Anne Hathaway and his own unfortunate marriage. Incidentally, the words contain a handsome admission of his own shortcomings.

But, quite apart from occasional glimpses, such as this, into his domestic affairs, nobody could reveal so much about life as Shakespeare does, without at the same time telling us a good deal about himself. However impartially he may hold the scales, he cannot always prevent us from seeing on which side his personal sympathies lie. Moreover, a dramatist is a creator, as well as a critic of life, and, when he makes man, he is obliged to make him, more or less, in his own image. Through the quality of the heroism in his heroes and of the baseness in his villains, through the problems which he chooses for his theme and the manner in which he treats them, he will inevitably reveal his own attitude to life. It is not from any one play, or from any single character, that we can gather this knowledge, but from the effect which the plays, as a whole, produce on us. And, taken

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as a whole, the plays do leave us with certain very strong impressions ; as, for example, that vices in nature carry their own doom with them, that mercy is the most divine of human qualities and ingratitude the basest, that pride and vanity are incalculably dangerous flaws in character, and that simple loyalties and natural affections are worth more than great ambitions. These are not the particular kind of impressions which we should receive from reading, let us say, the plays of Ibsen, nor could Shakespeare have imposed them on us, unless they had been an integral part of his own convictions. Another quality in him, which we soon learn to recognize and to trust, is the extraordinary balance of his mind. Whether he is writing Comedy or Tragedy, a sure instinct keeps him always on the level of reality. He does not flinch from the ugliest facts of life, but he does not distort them. The deeper emotions lend themselves most easily to exaggeration ; but never once does he lose his footing on the perilous edge of tragedy, or tumble into bathos. The steadiness of his vision is astounding ; and it is the same, whether it is fixed on a Falstaff or a King Lear.

When we put together the qualities which stand out clearly in his writings, and those which are implicit in the facts recorded about his life, we get a rather singular combination : soaring fancy and practical common sense,

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a delicate sensitiveness to beauty, and a business man's appreciation of the value of pounds, shillings, and pence. Our surprise, if we feel any, disappears when we remember that he also had an unfailing sense of humour. For, at bottom, a sense of humour is a sense of proportion. It was this gift which kept the other, and even greater, gifts his servants not his masters; it saved him from the danger which is so often fatal to sensitive natures, that of getting himself, his work, and his imaginative moods, out of perspective; and it enabled him to do what genius does not always succeed in doing, namely, to make a practical success of life.

It would be extremely interesting to see how this unusual blend of qualities came out in his features and expression. There are many portraits of him, but only three which have any claim to consideration: the portrait bust in Stratford church, the Droeshout engraving in the First Folio, and the picture in the Memorial Picture Gallery at Stratford, which may, or may not, have been the original of the engraving. All three give the dome-like forehead, which was, doubtless, a characteristic feature; but none is a work of art, or bears the stamp of an authentic likeness. So we are still left wondering. Aubrey, the Oxford antiquarian, who belonged to the next generation and collected information about Shakespeare, says that he was 'a handsome, well-shap'd man'; and the tradition

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that he played the parts of Adam in *As You Like It*, and the ghost in *Hamlet*, suggests that he certainly was not a small man. Of one thing we may be sure. He cannot have had the impressive kind of face and bearing which inspires awe, and produces silence when it enters a room; for, in that case, one-half of the world which he made his own would have been closed to him. The thoughts and language of kings and heroes can be learned in the study; but the thoughts and language of carters, tapsters, clowns, shepherds, and grave-diggers, are only open to those who can mingle with humble folk on terms of frank and jovial equality, and without any hint of conscious superiority. We shall probably not be far wrong if we picture him to ourselves as a man who, at first sight, was more attractive than impressive, adapting himself easily to his company whether it consisted of clowns or courtiers, more interested in other people than eager to assert himself, a good listener as well as a good talker, with an infectious laugh and a quick repartee, sociable, not contemptuous, and never shocked. For so only, it would seem, could he have acquired that intimate knowledge of what we call 'low life', which is as much a feature of his dramas as their transcendent poetry.

SOME INFERENCES AND GUESSES

NO doubt, it is idle to speculate about Shakespeare's beliefs and disbeliefs, likes and dislikes ; but, if idle, it is none the less interesting ; and there are some things which we can infer about him with tolerable certainty. He seems to have admired efficiency ; but rather half-heartedly, on account of the vein of hardness which he associated with it. He believed in authority, but was under no illusions about its infallibility ; he knew both 'the insolence of office' and its stupidity, which kept 'Art tongued by authority'. But memories of the Wars of the Roses were still alive in England, and all sensible men desired a strong government ; and a strong government at that time meant personal government. Moreover, he did *not* believe in the wisdom of the mass-mind, or hold that *vox populi* is *vox dei*. But to appeal to him as an authority on any of the controversial issues of to-day would be absurd. As a citizen, he belonged to his own age, and did not think outside it.

Genius is something greater than nationality, and, in his genius, Shakespeare belongs to the world. But, as a man, he was in many ways typically English ; in his love of England, his

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love of field sports, his respect for law, and, not least, in his capacity for compromise. He could sympathize with the hunted hare, or the wounded deer, and yet enjoy the chase; dwell in imagination among 'cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces', but limit his practical ambitions to a substantial house at Stratford; feel the futility of outward show, yet apply, successfully, to the College of Heralds for a grant of arms; nor did he refuse to enjoy his 'little life', because it was 'rounded with a sleep'.

We gather that he had something like a horror of darkness, and, consequently, a strong distaste for night; and this, in spite of the beautiful scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, which begins,

The moon shines bright; in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night.

But, otherwise, night is the time when murder stalks, witches have power to charm, and wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep; its sounds are ominous, its darkness the natural symbol of death. In the Sonnets it is 'ghastly', 'hideous', 'sullied'. But the most convincing passage of all is at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Puck says:

Now the hungry lion roars, —
And the wolf howls the moon,

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Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,
All with weary work fordone.
Now the wasted brands do glow,
And the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.
Now it is the time of night,
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Everyone lets forth his sprite,
In the church-way paths to glide.

For this is not the attitude towards night which we should expect from one of the fairies, who are always fleeing 'from the presence of the sun' and 'chasing darkness like a dream', it is rather a summary of the night-fears of childhood, not omitting that sound, so ludicrous in the day-time, so eerie in the dark—the heavy snoring of an adult. That Shakespeare should have harked back to such fears, while writing of the fairies, is a strong indication that for him the associations of night were, normally, of a disquieting nature.

Perhaps we may connect this distaste for night with some difficulty in sleeping. We should guess, *a priori*, that Shakespeare was not a good sleeper. Much of his writing must have been done at night, for the days must, generally, have been fully occupied by the business of the theatre—rehearsals, performances, and so forth. Any form of literary composition excites the brain; and Shakespeare's tragic themes were not of the kind that can be dismissed from the

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thoughts at a moment's notice. He must often have carried to his pillow an active and a 'beating mind', to which sleep was long in coming. There are passages in the plays which lend some colour to this supposition; as, for instance, the lines in *Macbeth*:

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

It would be a mistake to build too much on so slender a foundation; but these lines must have been written by one who at least knew what it was *not* to sleep.

Some difficulty in sleeping would help to account for Shakespeare's evident dislike of dogs; for nothing is so maddening to an uncertain sleeper as the barking of a dog at night. He had, indeed, the sportsman's eye for a good hunting breed.

My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
So flew'd, so sanded; and their heads are hung
With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
Crook-knee'd, and dew-lapped like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit, but match'd in mouth like bells,
Each under each. A cry more tuneable
Was never holloa'd to, nor cheer'd with horn.

But of what we may call the moral qualities of dogs, their affection, their fidelity, their obedience, there is never a word. Cats come off better as 'the harmless necessary cat', or

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'the poor cat i' the adage'. But dogs only bark, bite, fawn, howl, or sit by the fire and stink. They provide a ready illustration of the baser qualities in man; and, even in their courage, they are only 'foolish curs who run winking into the mouth of a Russian bear and have their heads crushed like rotten apples'.

Bears seem to have made an early and a permanent impression on Shakespeare's imagination. Bear-baiting was a common, though cruel, amusement of the time, and the animals were taken from town to town, and even from village to village, to be worried by the local mastiffs. The sight of a bear being led into Stratford for the next day's baiting must have been full of thrills, and no schoolboy would have missed it. We may imagine, too, that stories would be current of bears which had escaped and were prowling in the forest of Arden—a belief, no doubt, encouraged by parents whose children were given to straying. When we read such lines as,

I'll follow you, I'll lead you about a round,
Through bog, through bush, through brake,
through brier;

Sometime a horse I'll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, *a headless bear*, sometime a fire,

and,

Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear,

we seem to catch a glimpse of a small and truant

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boy, making his way back to Stratford in the gathering darkness, with his mind very much obsessed by the terror of bears. And so, probably, when, years afterwards, he was writing *A Winter's Tale*, and had to devise some means of getting rid of Antigonus, the thought of a bear came naturally into his head, and down went the abrupt, and rather startling, stage direction, *Exit, pursued by a bear*.

But to pass to a more serious topic. What, we often wonder, were Shakespeare's religious beliefs? Naturally, they are not apparent in his plays. Even if he had wished to introduce them the censor would have ruled them out. Nevertheless, it is difficult to believe that, if he had felt very strongly and deeply on such matters, he would have left no indication of any such feeling. He makes it clear that he had no sympathy with the Puritans. It was hardly likely that he would be drawn to them, seeing that they were attacking the theatre. But, in any case, their austere view of life was not his. 'Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?' On the other hand, he shows no marked preference for any other school of religious thought. His Archbishops and Bishops are all worldly intriguers; perhaps because he found them such in the story. But his priests, friars, and clergymen are not treated with any of those sympathetic touches which he had at command for any type

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of character that appealed to him. There is a strange mingling in the plays of Christian and pagan rites. The Purgatory of *Hamlet* is no more a clue to his personal beliefs than is the Delphic Oracle of *A Winter's Tale*. He used them both because they happened to suit the purposes of his play. He loved the Christian virtues of mercy and forgiveness ; but his was not the type of mind that welcomes dogma. He made his own discoveries about life through intuition, not through logic ; and the whole atmosphere of the plays suggests an unwillingness to bind himself down to any hard and fast formula. His doubts and despondencies seem to be connected with the nature of man, rather than with the nature of God, or the foundations of belief.

He was familiar with the Bible ; but he could hardly have been otherwise. Church-going was compulsory in his day, and the Bible (either the Genevan or the Bishops' Bible) was taught both at school and in the home. In one of Hollyband's Dialogues (published in 1573) the young son of a well-to-do citizen reads a chapter from St. John's Gospel, before dinner, to the assembled guests. Biblical allusions are fairly common in the plays ; but they are of the obvious kind, and do not necessarily imply any intimate knowledge. Certainly the Bible did not colour Shakespeare's thought, or mould his style, as it has done for

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so many great English writers ; and it can hardly have been his favourite reading. We may assume that he accepted the Elizabethan compromise without demur, partly because it was the State form of religion, and partly because he was not deeply interested in such questions ; and that he held, as most of his contemporaries held, that uniformity of worship was essential to national unity. It seems probable, too, that the aesthetic side of worship would appeal more to him than the doctrinal. More than this we are not entitled even to guess.

The last five years of his life were spent in retirement at Stratford. Did he enjoy his leisure, or did it kill him ? Different people have given different answers to this question. We can only weigh the *pros* and *cons*, and endeavour to strike a balance.

From London Bridge to Clopton Bridge, from the Thames to the Avon—to many of Shakespeare's London friends the change must have sounded like exile. It was, indeed, a complete change of interests, as well as of place. Stratford had its own preoccupations—the election of a bailiff, the prospects of the harvest, the price of corn and beasts, the births, deaths, and marriages amongst neighbours. But these were not the things which had absorbed Shakespeare's thoughts during the great years of his life. It is true that he paid frequent visits to London, and kept in touch with the theatre and

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his friends there ; but the long winter evenings at New Place in the company of his son-in-law, Dr. Hall, an eminent physician but no poet, may well have seemed somewhat tedious. Nor could the conversation of Mr. Thomas Combes, the most intimate of his Stratford friends, have possessed much sparkle for him, after the witty give-and-take of the Mermaid Tavern. Surely, one thinks, he must sometimes have missed the contact with stirring events, the free and open talk with fellow-dramatists and actors, the gossip of the tiring-room, the stimulus of kindred minds. For, with the exception of a few of the neighbouring gentry, who may, or may not, have invited him to their tables, there was nobody who could meet him on terms of anything like intellectual equality. Worse still ; what he must have regarded as the blight of Puritanism had spread to his native place, and, within a year of his return, the town council had passed a resolution forbidding the performance of plays and stiffening the fines on players : a strange way of welcoming the author of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* !

On the other hand, we must remember that Stratford could spring no surprises on him. He had been continuously in touch with the place, and must have known what to expect. One gathers, too, that he would be much less dependent than most literary people on intellectual society. He touched life at so many points,

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that no world, however limited, would have been uninteresting to him. He could talk to farmers and ploughmen in their own language, go to sheep-shearing feasts and light upon Perdita, discover Autolycus in the lanes and rejoice in the discovery. Besides, to those who have been born and bred in the country, the country is not dull. The restlessness, which has grown with the means of rapid locomotion, was unknown to our forefathers. They struck their roots deep into the soil, and, if they saw less of the world, they saw it more lovingly. And the Avon Valley was his own country, the country from which he had sucked his poetry, and which had never ceased to haunt his imagination. To return to it had been a long-cherished ambition, and he must at least be credited with knowing what he liked.

Again, if he may sometimes have had to listen in church to sermons which denounced the things which he esteemed 'the ornament of life', in the street and the market-place caps came off to him. For, though there were people in Stratford who condemned the drama, nobody despised property. As owner of New Place and a substantial landed estate, he was a person of consequence, and it is impossible to doubt that he enjoyed the position. He had probably looked forward to it as one of the advantages of retirement. In addition, he had, for whatever it was worth to him, the society of a family

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circle—a grand-daughter (and we gather from the plays that he was fond of children); a married sister, Joan Hart; nephews and nieces; his daughters, Susanna Hall and Judith, and his wife. We cannot think of him as a very domestic man. Whatever may have been his feelings towards his family (and he had never neglected them), he had managed to do without their company for most of his married life. But he was a man of normal instincts, and, when the years of work and adventure were over, he may well have felt a craving to be amongst his own kith and kin. His wife was probably something of a trial. Never very congenial, she too had imbibed the Puritan teaching. He left her his second-best bed, which cannot possibly be regarded as a mark of warm affection. He seems to have thought her a foolish woman, as no doubt she was. The bulk of his property went to his daughter Susanna, who, according to the inscription on her grave, possessed intelligence as well as the more solid virtues.¹

In conclusion: the spirit of the last plays, which we may take to be the spirit of his last years, is one of acquiescence; a frank acceptance of the facts of life. There is a tacit recognition that the world belongs to the young, but no hint of any longing to be young again.

¹ Witty above her sexe but that's not all;
Wise to Salvation was good Mistress Hall:
Something of Shakespeare was in that, but this
Wholy of Him with whom she's now in blisse.

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When Shakespeare broke his magic wand he broke it deliberately, not because it had failed him, but because he needed rest ; and, on the whole, it seems reasonable to suppose that he found in retirement what he hoped for and what he had expected, and that he had learned from life not to expect too much.

THE END

SHAKESPEARE had retired to Stratford in 1611. In January 1616 he made the first draft of his will, generally a sure sign that a man's health is failing seriously. Early in the same year he is said to have entertained Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton at New Place. In March he signed his will in the presence of five witnesses, and on April 23rd he died. He was buried in the chancel of the church, not because he was the greatest of poets, but because he was part owner of the great tithes. There is something characteristically English about that.

Did he realize how great he was? As a dramatist he had measured himself against his contemporaries, and had overtopped them all. But the drama was still a comparatively new thing in England, and it had yet to win its way as an accepted form of literature. Nor was it universally approved. It had the support of the Court, the great nobles, and the cultured classes generally; but the Puritans were hostile, and, before Shakespeare died, the tide of Puritanism was beginning to flow strongly. That publishers should have found it worth their while to 'pirate' individual plays during his lifetime,

and that Heminge and Condell brought out a complete edition within a few years of his death, is a conclusive proof of his popularity as a playwright. But it is quite possible that many people admired his plays, as plays, without fully realizing how great they were as poetry, simply because they were not accustomed to think of poetry in that form. Conventional habits of thought do not change quickly, and Shakespeare's greatest poetry was something entirely new. Even to-day, anybody making his first acquaintance with *Hamlet* by seeing it acted, would probably feel its interest more strongly than the beauty of its language. It is, I believe, only when we *read* Shakespeare, at leisure and with our minds undistracted by the engrossing business of the stage, that we fully realize the extraordinary quality of his poetry ; and far more of his own contemporaries must have seen his plays acted than ever read them. The simple directness with which he went straight to the heart of beauty, and which defies parody, produces an impression of inevitability rather than of art. It is, in fact, too great to seem clever ; and the ordinary man is more alive to cleverness than to perfection. In his Sonnets, which are deliberately clever, Shakespeare professes to believe in the immortality of his verse. But, in its context, we cannot feel sure that this profession means more than a conventional tribute to the worth of poetry as such. At all

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events, the lines which he wrote for his grave-stone do not suggest that he had much faith in the permanence of his fame. They were aimed at the superstition of clerks and sextons, and were an attempt to avert the otherwise inevitable fate of all but the most distinguished, namely, eventual disinterment and removal to the charnel house,

Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear,
To dig the dust enclosed here ;
Blest be the man that spares these stones,
And curst be he that moves my bones.

Nor is there any indication that he employed the leisure of his retirement in revising his plays and preparing them for publication. Perhaps the very ease with which he accomplished his greatest work helped to conceal from him the stupendous nature of his own achievement. If he thought at all about the place which he was likely to hold in the estimation of posterity, he probably did so in terms of the theatre rather than of the library. We get the impression that with him 'the play was the thing'; indeed, we have always to remember, when we are reading or criticizing his work, that it was written to be acted, and had, both in form and technique, to be adapted to the conditions of the stage as he found it. As an actor and a writer of plays he must have viewed the spread of Puritanism with misgiving; but he was probably more concerned for the future of the drama than

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troubled about his own reputation. For it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he had the particular kind of greatness which does not think much, or even at all, about present recognition or posthumous fame; and that his genius was matched by his modesty.

When the end came it made little stir in England, and few could have realized how great a sun had set. But, after more than three hundred years, he still lives for us in a way in which, perhaps, no other poet lives; always elusively beyond our grasp, yet always compellingly human. And if his genius defies our clumsy efforts to weigh and measure it, his love of Stratford remains the 'touch of nature' which makes him kin with us.

APPENDIX

A TABLE OF EVENTS IN SHAKE- SPEARE'S LIFE

bapt. = baptized. m. = married. d. = died.

- 1564. *April* 26. Bapt. at Stratford.
- July*. Plague at Stratford.
- 1565. His father becomes Alderman.
- 1566. *Oct*. Brother, Gilbert bapt.
- 1568. Father becomes Bailiff and 'Mr'.
- 1569. *April*. Sister, Joan bapt. m. William Hart. d. 1646.
- 1571. (or thereabouts) goes to school.
- 1574. *March*. Brother, Richard bapt. d. Feb. 1613.
- 1575. Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth.
- 1576. (or thereabouts) leaves school to help his father.
- 1580. *May*. Brother, Edmund bapt. Became a player.
d. at Southwark, Dec. 1607.
- 1582. *Dec*. m. Anne Hathaway of Shottery, by licence.
- 1583. *May*. Daughter, Susanna bapt.
- 1585. *Feb*. Twins, Hamnet and Judith, bapt.
Leaves Stratford.
- 1591. First play, *Love's Labour's Lost*.
- 1592. Greene's attack in *A Groat'sworth of Wit*, for which
the publisher, Chettle, apologized in the following
December in Preface to *Kind Hartes Dreame*.
- 1593. *Venus and Adonis*. Published by Richard Field,
a Stratford man. Dedicated by Shakespeare to the
Earl of Southampton.
Name on list of subsidy-payers in the parish of
St. Helen's, Bishopsgate.
- 1594. *May*. *Lucrece* published.
First of three bad harvests.
Fire at Stratford destroys 120 houses

Events in Shakespeare's Life

1596. *Aug.* Hamnet dies at Stratford.
Moves to Southwark, near the Bear Garden.
1597. *May.* Purchase of New Place at Stratford.
Richard Quiney sent from Stratford to ask for Shakespeare's help in securing some remission of taxation for the town.
1598. Reputation firmly established. Francis Meres in *Wits Treasury* wrote—'The Muses would speak Shakespeare's fine phrases, if they could speak English. He is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage'; mentions twelve of his plays, and calls him 'mellifluous and honey-tongued', and alludes to his 'sugared sonnets' in circulation among his private friends.
1599. *May.* Globe Theatre opened. Shakespeare a shareholder.
Grant of Arms by the Heralds' College.
Passionate Pilgrim published by Jaggard containing two of Shakespeare's sonnets (pirated) and three poems from *Love's Labour's Lost*.
1601. *Sept.* Death of Shakespeare's father at Stratford.
Publication of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, containing work by Shakespeare.
1602. *May.* Buys 107 acres of land near Stratford.
1603. Plague in London; theatres closed for six months.
Shakespeare's Company at Wilton.
1604. Lodging with Montjoy, a Huguenot, 'tire-maker' in Silver St., Cheapside.
1605. Buys part (about $\frac{1}{2}$) of the Great Tithes at Stratford.
1607. *June.* Susanna m. Dr. John Hall at Stratford. d. 1649.
1608. *Feb.* Granddaughter, Elizabeth Hall bapt. at Stratford.
Sept. Death of his mother (*née* Mary Arden) at Stratford.
Acquires a share in the theatre at Blackfriars.
1609. Thorpe's pirated edition of *The Sonnets* published.
1611. Retires to Stratford, but makes frequent journeys to London in the following years.

Events in Shakespeare's Life

1612. *Feb.* The public performance of plays forbidden at Stratford.
1613. Globe Theatre burned down. Rebuilt the following year.
1614. Puritan preacher entertained at New Place during Shakespeare's absence.
July. Another destructive fire at Stratford.
1616. *Feb.* Judith m. Thos. Quiney. d. 1662.
March 25. Signs his will.
April 23. Death of Shakespeare at New Place.
April 25. Buried in the Chancel of Stratford church.
-
1620. (or thereabouts) Monument erected in Stratford church.
1623. *Aug.* Shakespeare's widow buried at Stratford.
First Folio published.
1759. New Place pulled down by its owner, the Revd. Francis Gastrell, in a fit of temper.
1862. The garden and site of the house purchased by public subscription.

ORDER IN WHICH THE PLAYS WERE WRITTEN

There is, of course, no absolute certainty, but the following order is probably substantially correct.

A

Plays written entirely by Shakespeare.

- | | | |
|------|---|--|
| 1591 | { | <i>Love's Labour's Lost.</i> |
| | | And an early version of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (?). |
| 1592 | { | <i>Two Gentlemen of Verona.</i> |
| | | <i>Comedy of Errors.</i> |
| | { | <i>Midsummer Night's Dream.</i> |
| | | <i>Richard II.</i> |
| | | <i>Richard III.</i> |
| 1593 | | <i>King John.</i> |
| to | | <i>All's Well</i> , of which there was an earlier version called |
| 1596 | { | <i>Love's Labour's Won.</i> |
| | | <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> (in its present form). |
| | | <i>Henry IV, Part I.</i> |
| | | <i>Merchant of Venice.</i> |
| | | <i>Henry IV, Part II.</i> |
| 1597 | { | <i>Merry Wives of Windsor</i> (said to have been written in |
| to | | a fortnight). |
| | | <i>Henry V.</i> |
| 1599 | | <i>Much Ado.</i> |
| | { | <i>As You Like It.</i> |

The Tragic Period.

- | | |
|------|--|
| 1600 | <i>Julius Caesar.</i> |
| 1601 | <i>Twelfth Night</i> the last of the real Comedies. The song at the end suggests the change of mood. |

Order of the Plays

- 1602 { *Hamlet* of which there was more than one version.
to { *Measure for Measure*.
1609 { *Othello*.
 King Lear.
 Macbeth.
 Antony and Cleopatra.
 Coriolanus.
 Somewhere in this group (probably about 1602)
 comes the final version of *Troilus and Cressida*, which
 seems to have been composed at different times.

Last Plays.

- 1610 { *Cymbeline*.
to { *Winter's Tale*.
1611 { *Tempest*.

B

Plays ascribed to Shakespeare, which are not entirely his work.

Titus Andronicus, perhaps as early as 1590, and his revision of another man's play.

Henry VI (3 parts), 1591-2. Shakespeare's revision of other men's work.

Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare's adaptation of an earlier play. There were probably several versions, the final one dating from about 1597.

Timon of Athens. Probably an unfinished MS. of Shakespeare's, belonging to the Tragic Period and worked up after his death. It suggests a first attempt to deal with the theme of *King Lear*.

Pericles, Prince of Tyre. Not included in the First Folio; another man's play touched up by Shakespeare and first produced in 1608.

King Henry VIII. Probably John Fletcher's play, with some scenes by Shakespeare. Produced at the Globe Theatre in 1613. At a performance on June 29 of that year the discharge of cannon at the end of Act I set fire to the thatch of the roof, and the theatre was burned down.

PASSAGES RELATING TO SHAKESPEARE

A

From the Dedication to the Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery, and the Address to the Readers, in the First Folio.

1. 'For, so much were your Lordships likings of the severall parts, when they were acted, as before they were published, the Volume ask'd to be yours. We have but collected them and done an office to the dead . . . onely to keepe the memory of so worthy a Friend and Fellow¹ alive, as was our Shakespeare, by humble offer of his playes to your most noble patronage.'

2. 'It had beene a thing, we confesse, worthie to have beene wished, that the Author himselfe had liv'd to have set forth and overseen his owne writings. . . . Who, as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expressor of it. His mind and hand went together : And what he thought, he uttered with that easinesse, that wee have scarce received from him a blot' (i.e. erasure) 'in his papers. . . .

*John Heminge.
Henrie Condell.'*

B

From Ben Jonson's verses, in the First Folio.

1. Opposite the portrait.

The Figure, that thou here seest put,
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut ;

.
B. J.

¹ Fellow = fellow-member of their Company.

Passages Relating to Shakespeare

2. To the memory of my beloved,

The AUTHOR

Mr. William Shakespeare

And

What he hath left us.

. . . Soule of the Age !

The applause ! delight ! the wonder of our Stage !

My *Shakespeare*, rise ; I will not lodge thee by

Chaucer, or *Spencer*, or bid *Beaumont* lye

A little further, to make thee a roome :

Thou art a Moniment, without a tombe.

.

And, though thou hadst small *Latine* and less *Greeke*,

From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke

For names ; but call forth thund'ring *Aeschilus*,

Euripides, and *Sophocles*, to us,

Paccuvius, *Accius*, him of *Cordova* dead,

To life againe, to hear thy Buskin tread,

And shake a stage . . .

.

The merry *Greeke*, tart *Aristophanes*,

Neat *Terence*, witty *Plautus*, now not please.

.

Sweet Swan of *Avon* ! What a sight it were

To see thee in our waters yet appeare,

And make those flights upon the bankes of *Thames*

That so did take *Eliza*, and our *James* !

But stay, I see thee in the Hemisphere

Advanced, and make a Constellation there !

Shine forth thou Starre of *Poets*, and with rage,

Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage ;

Which, since thy flight fro hence, hath mourn'd like
night,

And despaire day, but for thy Volume's light.

BEN: JONSON.

Passages Relating to Shakespeare

C

From Ben Jonson's *Discoveries* (1641).

'I remember the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to *Shakespeare*, that in his writing, whatsoever he penn'd, hee never blotted out a line. My answer hath beene, would he had blotted a thousand. Which they thought a malevolent speech. I had not told posterity this, but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by, wherein he most faulted, and to justifie mine owne candor, (for I lov'd the man, on this side Idolatry, as much as any.) Hee was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature: had an excellent *Phantasie*; brave notions and gentle expressions: wherein he flow'd with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stopp'd.¹ . . . His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had beene so too. Many times hee fell into those things, could not escape laughter: As when hee said in the person of *Caesar*, one speaking to him; *Caesar thou dost me wrong*. Hee replied: *Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause*: and such like; which is ridiculous. But hee redeemed his vices with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praysed, than to be pardoned.'

[A curiously pedantic criticism; for *wrong* means obviously 'what you call a wrong'. But Ben Jonson could never quite forgive Shakespeare his 'little Latin and less Greek', and his neglect of the classical tradition.]

D

From the Commendatory Verses in the First Folio by L. Digges.

Shakespeare, at length thy pious Fellows give
The world thy works: thy works, by which outlive
Thy tomb thy name must. When that stone is rent,
And Time dissolves thy Stratford Monument,

¹ Stopped = checked.

Passages Relating to Shakespeare

Here we alive shall view thee still.¹ This book,
When brass and marble fade, shall make thee look
Fresh to all ages. . . .

... L. Digges.

¹ In this book we shall still see you alive.
Digges was not a great poet.

SOME BOOKS OF INTEREST

(*For Facts.*)

A Life of William Shakespeare, by Sir Sidney Lee (John Murray).

(*Literary Criticism.*)

Shakespeare, by Sir W. Raleigh (Macmillan).

Shakespearean Tragedy, by A. C. Bradley (Macmillan).

(*Of General Interest.*)

Shakespeare's England, 2 vols. (Clarendon Press).

Stratford-on-Avon, by Sir Sidney Lee (Seeley & Co.).

Shakespeare, the Man and his Stage, by Lamborn and Harrison
(Oxford University Press).

